

# The Myths and the Practical Needs of Using L1 in EFL Classes: A Learner Training Experiment

---

By Luis Augusto V.P. Reis

## L1 in EFL: From tradition to trends

The objective of this article is to describe an experiment carried out at ABA (Associação Brasil America, Recife) that may ignite the fire of discussion about an issue that already had seemed to be extinguished: What is the role of L1 (Portuguese) in EFL Teaching? How can we use L1 in a productive manner? Do beginners need L1 in their classes?

As TESOL theory evolves, views concerning the use of L1 in EFL classes have changed considerably. Dialectically, each successive trend in EFL seems to reject previous practices.

At this point, comprehensive radical changes in TEFL seem to have ended; and as we become more realistic about the needs of our students with language acquisition, we understand that preconceived ideas are no substitute for systematic and open-ended inquiry and research.

## The Context

I have been working with teenaged beginning students in EFL for years, and have found them to be sensitive and sincere. Revealingly, all my first-stage groups have strongly complained about my speaking only in English from the start of our contact. And-it is a bit difficult to admit-I had always been rather proud of limiting the classroom language to English only, since teaching English through English was/is one of the foundations of my TEFL belief system, only flexibly so.

Last semester, I started questioning whether my beginner students were merely behaving like *whiners* -as I think I had assumed until then-or they were honestly complaining about something that could be changed to enhance their learning. Were their learner rights being fully respected?

With that concern in mind, I decided to try out a new way of dealing with this issue. At first, my idea was to raise the students' commitment to maximizing the use of English in class. So I planned a detailed first day of class discussion about this particular matter. As a follow up, they would sign a contract agreeing to speak only in English. (Very naive indeed!)

I prepared myself to defend my point of view as if I were a skilled salesperson trying to convince his consumers to buy an unwanted product. I listed the pros of teaching English through English, I prepared good responses for each possible question they might ask-in short, I equipped myself for that first day of class as I had never done before.

## **What Did Learners Say?**

After I had monopolized the discussion for about twenty minutes, one of the students-a thirteen year-old girl-suggested that they should have the right to speak Portuguese at least half of the class time. Her point was that since they were beginners, it would not be fair to impose such "restriction upon communication freedom," as she so aptly put it. I could feel that it would not be so easy to talk that girl into speaking less, and in a limited way in English, when she could communicate important ideas fluently in her native language.

From that point on, I started negotiating. We ended up by agreeing to allow five minutes for Portuguese in each class. They seemed to be content with that.

So, after that tough day of negotiation, my lesson plans gained one more step: (besides the warmup, presentation, practice, etc.) now we had five minutes of Portuguese, or "The Portuguese Break" (PB), as we decided to call it. The next question to arise was, should we have our PB in the beginning, middle, or end of the lesson? To make things simpler, we cooperatively decided that it would occupy the last five minutes of each class. Actually, this changed many times. One day, the PB might appear at the end of class; another day at the middle or beginning, according to our needs. We ended up making visual signs (green and red) to indicate the beginning and the end of the "Portuguese Break."

## **A Technique That Pays Off!**

From the first time we had our PB, I could notice its dramatic impact on lowering my students' affective filter. In fact, they established a very close relationship with me in the first week of class. Their social skills were visibly enhanced. After two or three sessions, they were already working as a group. Another outstanding characteristic of the PB technique came to light: it stimulated my students to engage in a spontaneous process of self evaluation. During PB time they talked about their performance, asked questions about communication problems, and monitored their development. Better than that, they paved the way for my daily evaluation of their performance and mine as well.

Then, I realized that a very powerful pedagogical instrument had fallen in my lap. I had accidentally come across an easy and effective manner not only to evaluate my students every class, but especially to foster awareness of the Language Learning/Teaching process. At the same time, the use of the PB technique helped me keep up their level of motivation, self esteem and interest toward the new language they were learning.

## Research and Outcome

I recognized the need to investigate the pros and cons of this technique as a means of enhancing my teaching performance. I was sure that there were some questions that should be researched and analyzed. My first idea was to emphasize the learner training aspects of the Portuguese break and see how my students would respond. So, I conducted our PB conversations by using questions and statements highlighting their learning skills, strategies, and potentials.

I was impressed with the outcome. They sharpened their perception and started thinking about how they could improve their performance. Very soon, learner training terminology like, *skills*, *strategies*, *vocabulary acquisition*, became part of their hall chitchat.

By observing their keen interest in understanding more about the language learning process, I felt encouraged to start giving them more information about the teaching process. So, during our PB talks, I started telling them about my ideas and goals for that class. Little by little, our conversation evolved to more focused points: The steps of each lesson plan; what teachers expect their pupils to do in each stage of the class; how teachers correct students' mistakes, etc.

Moreover, after a couple of weeks I was showing them my lesson plans and explaining each step and its importance for the success of the class.

Again, their response was startling. Once they had a better understanding of the learning/teaching process, they began to see how each simple class exercise or homework assignment was important for their improvement. They became much more responsible and critical about our (teacher's and students') performances. Their values changed a lot, too. They could tell a useful activity from one that was not. Since they were more aware about the challenges of learning a new language, they could understand their friends' difficulties more easily and thus show more willingness to help one another. They built a respectful classroom atmosphere in which peer correction and self evaluation were much more than fashionable theoretical concepts.

When the semester was over, I started assessing the effects of the "Portuguese Breaks." I could see how they facilitated the achievement of our goals; how things looked simpler and easier; how our classes became more lively and truly humanizing; how my students became more disciplined, competent, and responsible learners; how they developed their critical thinking and socializing skills; how they became less dependent on translation; and, surprisingly, how the importance of speaking English in class was valued.

Now I am convinced that the crucial issue is not the amount of L1 that is used in an EFL class, but the purpose for using it. I, myself, found a way of capitalizing on Portuguese in my classes. Talking about the language learning/teaching process has always been a fundamental component of my teaching style, and it was rather difficult to do with beginners if I spoke only English.

## Feedback for Enlightened Decision-making

Today's ESOL teachers are more conscious about what should or should not be done in class and why. Gone are the days of magic recipes.

Professor Francisco Gomes de Matos, who inspired and assisted with this article, has advocated the importance of sharing our classroom decision making with our students in order to foster a humanizing environment where cooperative learning and personal growth germinate.

Accordingly, an initial open-ended checklist for helping colleagues reflect on the way in which they have dealt with the use of L1 in their classes is suggested:

1. Have I ever questioned why my students should/should not have the right to use their native language in class?
2. Have I been biased regarding the use of L1 in class ?
3. What have I done so far to deal with students speaking L1 in class?
4. Have I ever used a technique (like Portuguese Breaks) before? If so, what happened? Why?
5. Have I searched for creative, humanizing solutions to this problem?
6. What have I done to exercise my classroom negotiating skills and strategies?

We would be pleased to hear from colleagues who have come up with other ways of using L1 fruitfully. Obrigado!

**Luis Augusto V.P. Reis** was a former teacher at AssociaOao Brasil America, Boa Viagem, Recife.